

ARTHUR CONAN DOYLE

An Appreciation of the Author of "Sir Nigel,"
the Great Romance Which Begins Next Sunday

"When the Most Successful
Novelist Writes His Master-
piece the Eyes of the World
Who Read Are Upon Him"

"Doyle Has Painted More
Wonderful Pictures in Words
Than Any of His Forbears
With Palette and Brush"



THERE is much in the career of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle which is of exceeding interest as to the facts; of exceeding value as to the lessons. Many write and few succeed. In these days of universal education, when stories and books are coming from a million pens, an American author offers a dinner to all the novelists whose literary incomes average five thousand dollars a year and does not fear that his dining-room will be overcrowded. The truth is that, viewed from this point, Conan Doyle is a rarer and more novel creation than Sherlock Holmes. The Sherlock Holmes idea, the basic principle on which this modern detective wrought his wonderful results, was well developed by the elder Dumas and others. Doyle, as a story-teller, is entirely his own creation. He holds the priceless secret of success, and it is a quest of no little interest to all his readers to discover, if possible, what that secret is.

The first impression, the major cause, the dominant note, that strikes one as he considers him and his work, is physical energy. Whenever and wherever the powerful body is united with the active imagination, success in any line of endeavor is certain, and greatness, as the word goes, is possible. Such are our great statesmen, our great artists, our great lawyers. It is useless for the mind to conceive greatly unless the body can stand the severer strain of executing greatly. With the gift of superabundant energy, however, Sir Arthur has the unusual characteristic of bigness. He is over six feet in height, stalwart, muscular, seeing all things in a big, large-hearted way. In this he is unique, as most of the world's great men and nearly all of the world's great novelists have been short in stature—they have never lacked in physical energy, but their visible development has been mental rather than physical. He is a member of the Athenæum and the National Sporting Clubs of London, two organizations as far apart in all things as the Poles. And this is one way of saying that he is a man of high physical and mental ideals, which indeed is the first and most prominent peculiarity manifest in his novels, his characters and his general literary plan.

And it is most interesting to note how this big lumbering boy in school at Stonyhurst, this boy who wanted to be and easily could have been one of England's famous cricketers, was led into the path of his great success. We hear much of the "destiny which shapes our ends"; but here is that destiny in active operation before our eyes, revealing its action step by step. He knew nothing of his future. He had no definite ambition beyond the desire to be a doctor, and all the while his future was making through causes of which he had no knowledge. "Sow an act and you reap a habit. Sow a habit and you reap a character. Sow a character and you reap a destiny"—is one of the best practical definitions of the dominant force in human lives that has appeared. Underneath all these lies an inherited tendency, a ruling instinct,

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which lies within ourselves and molds the life of each of us. This eliminates all superhuman influences, and there is no need to seek for superhuman influences in the present instance. Heredity is all-sufficient as the primal cause.

Ireland, through his ancestry, gave him the quick imagination and the versatility of its race. On the walls of his home at Hindhead hang many original pictures which show the strong artistic bent of his family. His grandfather, John Doyle, was a famous caricaturist. His uncle, Richard Doyle, was the famous "Dickie" Doyle of "Punch." The quaint, strange water-colors of his father, Charles Doyle, there to be seen, rival if they do not exceed in originality the work of his uncle. And in their peculiar individuality, in their ghosts and fairies, in their goblin-trees and cloud-framed faces, their fantastic, smiling landscapes and mystic, wraith-haunted graveyards, a breadth of imagination joined to a delicacy and certainty of execution which were the direct heritage of the son. All who are familiar with Sir Arthur's books will know how strong an influence this imaginative gift has exercised upon his work.

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Better than this, however, they gave him the draftsman's eye and the draftsman's hand, the power of close observation and the ability to reproduce faithfully what is observed. The most notable feature of Sir Arthur's historical novels is not so much the elaborate and painstaking fidelity in details, but the convincing power of the result. In his greatest novel up to now, "The White Company," we are chiefly impressed, artistically speaking, by the tremendous reality of it all. We breathe the very atmosphere of the dead century. We live the life, we are an actual part of the time, and we cannot escape this feeling. The illusion, in short, is complete, and this proves strong conception, perfect drawing and wonderful completeness of detail. Emerson said that the laws underlying all the arts were the same, and the truth of this was never better exemplified than in the work of Conan Doyle, son and grandson of artists, who has painted more wonderful pictures in words than did any of his forbears with palette and brush.

Without any dreams of a literary career he went to Edinburgh to become a doctor, and was graduated with distinction at the age of twenty-one. And then he discovered that he wanted to do a great many things which were highly inconsistent with the career of a dignified

English practitioner. He wanted to see the world; not the world of cities, but those isolated regions in which strong men met, in daily conflict for his existence, the majestic forces of nature. As the doctor of a whaling-ship, he spent two years in the Arctic. Still holding to the sea, he crossed and re-crossed the ocean and saw and learned life in West Africa. He was a rolling stone, but he was rolling toward a goal of which he was not aware. Finally repressing his desire to wander, he settled down at Southsea to become a conventional doctor. Fees were slow in coming, but he did not lack humor, and waited his opportunity, until a prominent and wealthy local resident was thrown from his horse in front of the doctor's office. He rushed out, bound up the bruises, called a handsome open carriage and rode slowly through the town, supporting the injured man in an attitude of scientific devotion which would have made the fame of an old master. The admiring populace rose to the picture and said: "How beautiful!" Fees flowed in, the practice was established, and the doctor sighed. Medicine had claimed him, and his life was to be that of a conventional doctor after all.

But now another shaping force made its appearance and grew in volume despite continued discouragement. While in college at Edinburgh he had written a story called "The Mystery of the Sassassa Valley." He was full of untold stories. An ardent reader all through his youth of all that is heroic in fiction, these seeds had germinated in his imagination, and the artist's son wanted to draw, to portray, to create, but in the way of letters. "The Mystery of the Sassassa Valley," his first story, was published by "Chambers's Journal" in 1878, but served no other office at that time than to prove to him that he could write for the public. Four years afterward, however, the spirit again moved him, and he began to steal hours from his practice at Southsea to write other stories. Many were they in number, and wide was their scope. He wrote stories of the sea, stories of the Arctic, stories of war, stories of dead centuries and far countries, and received no encouragement whatever.

Bret Harte once told me that even late in his life he had not been able to realize that his stories were commercial commodities—were actually worth money—that but for his vigilant agent he would have starved to death—being totally unable to sell one of his stories himself. Much this view of things was forced upon the Southsea doctor. He wrote between fifty and sixty stories, all of which were accepted and published by "The Cornhill," "Temple Bar" and other magazines, but the pay was in shillings, and they were published anonymously, not being deemed worthy of his unknown signature. In ten years of such ardent and active literary creation he earned less than fifty dollars per annum by his pen.

And herein lies one great lesson. That he per-